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ABSTRACT

A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF SYNTACTIC DIFFERENCES IN THE MASS NOUN-COUNT NOUN CONTRAST IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH REVEALS THE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES AND OTHER PATTERN DRILLS. A DEFINITIONAL STATEMENT OF THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE TWO CLASSES OF NOUNS INCLUDES NUMEROUS EXAMPLES IN BOTH LANGUAGES. BY TAKING SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC DISTINCTIONS INTO CONSIDERATION, THE AUTHOR SUGGESTS THAT THE TEACHING OF THE FORMS AND USES OF THE FRENCH ARTICLE, PARTICULARLY THE PARTITIVE, WILL BE MADE MORE EFFECTIVE. (RL)

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# MASS NOUNS AND COUNT NOUNS IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH

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Mass nouns show no number contrast and do not have a plural; count nouns can be counted and do have a plural. It has been said that "the contrast between mass and count nouns is a crucial one" in English grammar.[1] French likewise divides its common nouns into count nouns and mass nouns according to a pattern which often parallels that of English.[2] The organization of several disparate features of French around the principle of a mass-count noun contrast and a comparison with the English situation in this regard can be helpful in language teaching.[3]

It is the accompanying French article which usually establishes the noun contrast,[4] and thus the latter is important to an understanding of the proper uses of the definite, indefinite, and partitive articles in French. Most substitution drills mingle count and mass nouns indiscriminately, so the student is confronted at once with the seeming illogic of, for instance, "donnez-moi de la viande" versus "donnez-moi des pommes." His confusion increases when he encounters such a distinction as "je n'ai pas de soeur" versus "je n'ai pas de soeurs." He may also wonder how to handle the distinction between such instances of the generalizing article as "la neige est blanche" versus "les livres sont utiles." Sooner or later the clarity and simplicity we labor to achieve will be clouded and complicated by the count-mass contrast unless we take account of it in our initial presentation and organize our pattern practice drills around this basic feature of syntax. We must make the analogies and differences between French and English in this regard work for us.

What are some of the principal features which mark the contrast in English? Count nouns may be counted and therefore have a plural. Mass nouns show no number contrast and therefore cannot be used with the indefinite article. The former refer to discreet, individual objects; the latter represent substances of qualities, either concrete or abstract. We sometimes have a choice in English between the singular of a mass noun or the plural of a count noun to express the same concept (foliage vs. leaves). Many English nouns may be used either as count or mass nouns ("French wine is good" vs. "Here is a good French wine"). In such instances, the mass noun may be accompanied by the indefinite article. Whether a noun is functioning as a count or a mass noun can be easily determined by the "sense", because there is always a semantic contrast between the two uses. All the above mentioned constructions have counterparts in French. But a few instances where French and English nouns do not correspond need special attention (la salade vs. salad greens/ les cheveux vs. hair/ le raisin vs. grapes, etc.). There is also a subclass of English nouns having only a plural form which generally does not have corresponding sets in French; the Frenchman says le pantalon, le pyjama, la richesse, la rougeole, in

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instances where English shows only a plural (trousers, pyjamas, riches. measles).

How does French construction differ with respect to these noun types? Whereas English uses neither the indefinite nor the definite article with concrete mass nouns (that is, those representing elements, textiles, substances, or products), French does use the partitive article (bread vs. du pain). However, a useful analogy can be drawn between such partitive constructions and the language of the King James version of the Bible ("He took of the bread ..."), where the essential partitive idea is preserved in English. English also has the construction "some of the" which corresponds to the French partitive except for the word "some" ("some of the water" vs. "de l'eau"). Hence, the use of "some" to translate the French partitive may confuse the issue. To generalize about concrete mass nouns, English omits the definite article entirely, whereas French does not ("Snow is white"/ "La neige est blanche"). With abstract mass nouns, English never uses any article; French again uses the definite article ("They want peace"/ "On veut la paix").

Both English and French use the definite and indefinite articles in the same way to denote specific objects or individuals. However, in French the partitive construction des replaces the indefinite article with a plural noun, while English has no analogous construction (a dog/ un chien/ the dog/ le chien/ but dogs/ des chiens). It is useful to notice that when count nouns are used as mass nouns both English and French may use the definite article as a generalizing determiner ("The dog is an animal"/ "Le chien est un animal"). Likewise, when mass nouns function as count nouns, both languages employ the articles in the same way ("Here is a good wine"/ "Voici un bon vin"/ "Tell me the truth"/ "Dites-moi la vérité").

Constructions with quantitative modifiers serve to underline the count-mass contrast in both languages and create additional problems, because English and French usage often differ. In English, "a small amount of" can be expressed by "few" before the plural form of count nouns. "Few" must be replaced by "little" before mass nouns, and it must be distinguished from the more positive concept "a few" ("few books"/ "a little coffee"/ "few books"/ "a few books"). The distinction between "few" and "little" does not exist in French; thus, in French one may say equally "peu de livres" and "peu de café" (few - not many - books/ little - not much - coffee). The contrast in French is rather between "peu de" and "un peu de" with count versus mass nouns. Whereas "peu de" can be used with either mass or count nouns, "un peu de" can occur only with mass nouns, and "quelques" is used with count nouns only ("peu de café"/ "peu de livres/ "un peu de café"/ "quelques livres"). Let us, then, try to avoid misleading so-called English equivalents of these concepts: "few", "a few", "little", and above all, "some", should be used very carefully if at all in our classrooms, because the correspondence with French expressions is inexact. "Quelques" might well be introduced at an early stage of instruction, in order to complete the partitive picture.

In English there is a contrast between "much" used with mass nouns, and "many", which occurs with count nouns ("much coffee"/ "many books").

French uses "beaucoup de" in all cases ("beaucoup de livres"/ "beaucoup de liberté"). The construction presents no problems except those that the student carries over from English; "beaucoup de" corresponds not only to "much" and "many" but also to "a great deal of" and "a lot of"; this fact, together with the indiscriminate mingling of count and mass nouns in drills serves to confuse the student, sometimes irrevocably.

To express the notion"every single one of" with count nouns in English we may choose between "every" with the singular and "all the" with the plural ("every book"/ "all the books"). "All" is used with the singular of mass nouns to express this concept ("all coffee"/ "all liberty"). The contrast between "every" and "all" does not exist as such in French. French is capable of conveying the same meaning with some form of tout, plural for count nouns ("tous les livres"/ "all the books"), singular for mass nouns ("tout le café"/ "all the coffee" but note "tout café"/ "any coffee"). The singular of "tout" may be used with count nouns, but it then acquires a different meaning ("tout le livre"/ "the whole book"). "Every" also has the French counterparts "chaque" and "chacun de" which are likewise used with count nouns. After initial exposure to the partitive and the generalizing definite article, our students might profit by an introduction to the other syntactical environments in which count and mass nouns contrast. In English, when the concept "all" is unstressed, the article is omitted as well as the modifier; the corresponding construction in French is with the definite article. This is true for both count and mass nouns.

When "some" is used in English before the plural of a count noun it is unstressed, and here French diverges and employs a partitive construction ("some books"/ "des livres"). However, when "some" appears before a singular English noun, that noun is a mass noun, by definition, and the concept is stressed. French, in like instances, does not use the partitive, but various other constructions too complicated for early introduction in our classrooms. Here is another reason why we should avoid equating "some" with the French partitive. "Some" can also serve in English as a pronominal replacement for mass nouns ("Give me some"), but it cannot replace count nouns in the singular ("Give me one"). This is a feature of the count-mass contrast which complicates the task of the French teacher, when he treats the syntax of the pronoun en, and it provides another example of the dangers of so-called English equivalents.

These, then, are the principal syntactical environments in which English and French count and mass nouns contrast. The basic situation is analogous, but there are many divergencies between the two languages' behaviour with respect to this contrast. It cannot be ignored. We must indicate to our students that there are two kinds of nouns. Then, we should arrange illustrative sentences and drills so that the classes of nouns are separated, in the initial stages at least. Count and mass nouns will be further subdivided according to whether they are capable of functioning equally as count and mass nouns and, in the case of mass nouns, according to whether they are concrete or abstract. In drills using quantitative modifiers, we will organize them on the basis of analogy or divergence from corresponding English constructions. If we use English equivalents, we

will choose them carefully, being aware of the confusion that may be caused by differences from French usage. Then, being aware of the syntactic and semantic contrast between mass and count nouns in both languages, we can teach more effectively the forms and uses of the French article, particularly the partitive construction.

## NOTES

1 H.A. Gleason, Jr., Linguistics and English Grammar (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), p. 136.

2 The somewhat analogous situation for German has been analyzed by Madison S. Beeler in a paper presented before the Linguistics Section of the PAPC, November, 1968, Tucson, Arizona. I thank Professor Beeler for putting his erudition at my disposal and encouraging me to pursue this subject.

3 The importance of this contrast for the teaching of Spanish has been recognized by William Bull in Spanish for Teachers: Applied Linguistics (New York: Ronald Press, 1965).

4 Lucien Tesnier, Eléments de Syntaxe Structurale (Paris: Klincksieck, 1959), p. 85: "L'article a pour fonction d'indiquer l'extension du substantif." See also, George Rostrevor Hamilton, The Tell-Tale Article: A Critical Approach to Modern Poetry (London: Heinemann, 1949).